

# A FEMINIST STUDY OF OTHERNESS IN A *STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* AND ITS IRANIAN FILM ADAPTATION, *THE STRANGER*

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## Abstract

Movie adaptations of dramatic works have always been very popular. Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) has been adapted several times and in different ways. Feminist and gender studies have examined the important role of Otherness in the construction of female identity. Using their findings, we compare the ways in which the theme of Otherness has been employed in representing female gender identity in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and in its Iranian film adaptation, *The Stranger* (*Bigāneh*) (2014). The results of the study show that while in both works the female characters' traditional female roles have been highlighted, in the Iranian movie the main female character economically enjoys a relatively higher independence and can have a voice of her own to act against the patriarchal traditions. Besides, whereas in the source text women's identity is solely associated with their being the Other of men, women in *The Stranger* stand on a par with their male companions, if not higher than them. The study also reveals that a main reason for these differences originates in the sociopolitical, cultural and historical discrepancies between the contexts in which the film and the play were created.

**Keywords:** Otherness, Feminism, Gender Identity, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Stranger*, Culture

## ESTUDIO FEMINISTA DE LA OTREDAD EN *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* Y EN SU ADAPTACIÓN CINEMATOGRAFICA IRANÍ, *THE STRANGER*

### Resumen

Las adaptaciones fílmicas de obras de teatro han sido siempre muy populares. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) de Tennessee Williams ha sido adaptado en varias ocasiones y de formas diferentes. Los estudios feministas y de género han explorado la función nuclear de la Otredad en la caracterización de la identidad femenina. A partir de estos postulados, comparamos los procedimientos mediante los cuales el tema de la Otredad se ha usado para representar la identidad genérica femenina en *A Streetcar Named Desire* de Tennessee Williams y en su adaptación cinematográfica iraní, *The Stranger* (*Bigāneh*) (2014). Los resultados del estudio apuntan a que, aunque en ambas obras se destacan los papeles tradicionales en los personajes femeninos, en la película iraní el protagonista femenino disfruta de una independencia económica relativamente mayor y dispone de voz propia para reaccionar contra las tradiciones patriarcales. Además, mientras que en el texto fuente la identidad femenina se asocia meramente con su naturaleza como lo Otro respecto al varón, las mujeres de *The Stranger* están a la misma altura que sus contrapartidas masculinos, si no más altas. El trabajo revela igualmente que una razón principal para estas diferencias estriba en las discrepancias sociopolíticas, culturales e históricas entre los contextos respectivos en que fueron creados el drama y la película.

**Palabras clave:** otredad, feminismo, identidad de género, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Stranger*, cultura

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Movie adaptations of dramatic works have always been very popular. Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, first performed in 1947, is one of the American plays that have been adapted several times in various places and cultures. This play received the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 and is among the most famous plays in the world literature. However, many people know Williams "through watching a cinematic version," rather than reading his plays (Adler 2013: 115). Elia Kazan's movie adaptation of the same name, produced in 1951, Woody Allen's American *Blue Jasmine* broadcast in 2013 and Bahram Tavakoli's *The Stranger* (*Bigāneh*), produced in Iran in 2014, are among the movie adaptations of Williams's play that have appealed to a wide range of audiences. As T. P. Adler (2013: 115) notes, one of the reasons for the directors' strong interest in Williams's plays is that he was "a Hollywood screenwriter" and thus employed "films techniques" in his plays. For instance, he included an "episodic structure" in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and spotlighted the characters in order to "stimulate close-ups during the monologues" in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2013: 115). In a similar fashion, Russell Holman claims that Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* "has the ingredients for a great

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motion picture of international appeal” (qtd. in Palmer and Bray 2009: 72). These techniques and features have made his plays so adaptable that many movie, television, and opera adaptations of them have appeared so far.

One of the most interesting themes in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Otherness and its relation to gender identity. Critics have discussed gender issues in Tennessee Williams’s plays. Ammar Shamil Kadhim believes that in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, “Williams illustrates society’s changing attitudes towards masculinity and denounces the society’s attitudes towards women in America” at the time (2010: 102). David Sarvan argues that with his “radicalism” Williams has undermined “gendered subjectivity” in the play (1992: 80). Philip C. Kolin also contends that Williams has challenged the “traditional codex of sexuality in the 1950s” in his plays and shattered the “orthodox modes of genderization” (2000: 145). As he explains, Williams has achieved this through the omission of “binary oppositions between masculinity and femininity” and between “heterosexuality and homosexuality” (145).

The scene in which Blanche and Mitch struggle reveals that the playwright has attempted to “reconstruct and deconstruct sexist gender politics of the post-war era” that categorize “women as either easy or good” (Tripković-Samardžić 2016: 105). C. W. E. Bigsby argues that it is significant about Williams’s *Streetcar* that it was “the first American play in which sexuality was patently at the core of the lives of all its principal characters” (qtd. in Welsch 2009: 24). Carolyn Bain contends that Williams has been able to undermine “the social performance of gender” in the play (2007: 300). In addition, as Palmer and Bray suggest, the play concerns “sexual malfeasance” along with “the connection between desire and violence, and the complexities of contemporary gender politics” (2009: XII). Similarly, from Sarvan’s viewpoint, what has been interesting for the “progressive and innovative film makers of the postwar era” to adapt Williams’s plays “was not only their evident literariness”, but also their success in “undermining conventionalized presentations of sexuality and gender” which help “reenergize a commercial theatre hitherto becalmed in intellectual and formal doldrums” (qtd. in Palmer and Bray 2009: 63). Ralph F. Voss investigates the influence of “the rise of gender studies” on the perception of Williams’s plays, and he asserts that “the shackled sexuality not only of Williams’s characters but also of Williams himself always provided potent motivation and incident, bringing yet more ways of understanding brilliant creations like Blanche DuBois and Big Daddy Pollitt” (2002: 3).

Several studies have investigated gender issues in the film adaptations of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Elise Ann Earthman believes that the play, along with Kazan's adaptation of it, "depicts an epic struggle between ultramasculine and ultrafeminine forces" (2003: 274). Eithne O'Neill argues that "central to Kazan's *Streetcar*, as to Williams's play, is the portrayal of woman as the lynch-pin of the relationship between the individual and society" (2004: 169). Considering the Iranian adaptation, *The Stranger*, Faezeh Sasanikhah examines Nasrin's —the Iranian equivalent for Blanche— frequent change of wigs to suggest her obsession with changing her identity as a woman and to indicate that she seeks "temporary" and "artificial" identities (2014: n. p.); the wigs play the role of the masks and, if they are omitted, the character loses her identity (n. p.).

No academic research has yet taken a comparative approach to investigate *Otherness* in both Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and its Iranian movie adaptation. In the present study, we aim to compare and contrast Tennessee Williams's play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and its most recent film adaptation, *The Stranger*, to explore the concept of female Otherness. We will examine the ways in which cultural and sociopolitical contexts affect the identity of women in the film adaptation in order to reveal similarities as well as differences with the play and the original film, in terms of representation of female Otherness.

## **2. A Synopsis of the Film Adaptation, *The Stranger***

*The Stranger*, produced in 2014 and directed by Bahram Tavakoli in Iran, is the most recent movie adaptation of Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. After the great success of *Here without Me* (*Injā Bedoon-e Man*) in 2011, a film adaptation of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *The Stranger* is Tavakoli's second adaptation of Williams's plays. The movie tells the story of Nasrin, an art teacher, who visits her sister, Sepideh, and Amir (Sepideh's husband), after a long time. On the first day, Nasrin explains to her sister that she has sold her house in the town because she needed money for taking care of her sick mother. Amir becomes angry over Nasrin's sale of the house and expresses his annoyance in his treatment of her. He starts investigating Nasrin's previous years for any problem by asking people in the town about her attitudes and eventually learns about her misdeeds and the fact that she is wanted by the police. Meanwhile, Nasrin gets acquainted with Amir's friend, Davood, who is a taxi driver. Later, Sepideh finds out about her sister's misdeeds too, especially her seducing a young boy at school, who committed suicide. Outraged by the news, Sepideh orders

Nasrin to leave the house. The movie ends vaguely with Nasrin walking playfully at night, while Davood is waiting for her in front of the house.

### 3. Feminism, Gender Identity, and Otherness

The debate over the distinction between sex and gender is a familiar concern of feminist theorists. Pilcher and Whelehan argue that the “physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated” by the patriarchal society in order “to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to ‘domestic’ roles” (2004: 56). Simone de Beauvoir, one of the forerunners of feminism, explains that sex is the biological and natural aspect of every creature. Therefore, it is fixed, unchangeable and predetermined. But unlike sex, she adds, gender is constructed by society and is, therefore, flexible and depends on the context:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (1956: 273)

De Beauvoir believes that “gender is an aspect of identity” and “the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires” (Butler 1986: 35). Teresa de Lauretis, the Italian feminist, maintains that “gender is not the property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings, but ‘the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations,’” (1987: 3). Similarly, R. J. Stoller finds gender as “a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations” (1984: 9). As he claims, “If the proper terms for sex are ‘male’ and ‘female’, the corresponding terms for gender are ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex” (9). In her most famous feminist work, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett draws upon Stoller’s work and suggests that “the significance of sexual differences and gendered temperaments is entirely social” (Coole 2013: 170). She, therefore, considers sex “biological” and gender “psychological” (170). Thus, “socialization, interiorization, and conditioning explain how gendered temperaments are produced from generic human possibilities” (170).

In the same way, Gayle Rubin has “used the notion of gender to denote the meanings that societies attribute to sexed bodies” (qtd. In Giordano 2013: 11). Gender identity is, therefore, “an individual’s personal sense of

identity as masculine or feminine, or some combination thereof” (Morrow and Messinger 2006: 8). In other words:

Gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated, so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even as a man who fantasies being a woman (Stoller 1984:10)

This, of course, results from a variety of factors “derived from experiences with family members, teachers, friends, and coworkers and from cultural phenomena” (Sadock & Sadock 2008:303). Hossein Payandeh also argues that the gender identity of women is constructed as the result of “internalizing the cultural normative expectations” of each society “about being a woman” (2006: 177). As he says, by gender identity, we mean the “cultural meanings” that we attribute to women (177). Hence, it is constructed “discursively and socially” in Rosenthal’s words (2003: 8). As Cecilia Almqvist affirms in the same way, the new approach to gender research suggests that “gender identity is constructed constantly through the use of the language and in interaction with other members of the society. Thus, the surrounding society is a cultural atmosphere with cultural prescriptions about what femininity and masculinity are” (2000: 186). In such a way, every society with its dominant ideology can define the gender identity of people and can induce it in them in a variety of ways, including literature, arts and the media.

Many feminists share the idea that the notion of gender difference is a core element in feminist politics (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004: 27). As Massih Zekavat and Farideh Pourgivi point out, these feminists argue that “the identity of social subjects” is constructed on the basis of “opposition”, “otherness,” and “difference” (2015: 2). In other words, as people try to define themselves, they, in fact, create a dichotomy of self vs. other, in which they identify themselves as belonging to one group and in relation to the other. This seems quite different in a patriarchal society, because women have no option but to accept the identity prescribed for them by men. Thus, gender identity is constructed socially by the dominant voices of a society.

In their article, Zekavat and Pourgivi (2015) refer to several critics, from Simone de Beauvoir to Spivak, who find Otherness the core denominator of gender identity. De Beauvoir reveals “how women have been posited as the

absolute Other of men by employing both existentialist and Hegelian insights” (Zekavat and Pourgiv 2015: 5). As she argues, “At the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the Other arises” (de Beauvoir 1956: 104). This happens especially in patriarchal societies where women are considered as the Other only because they are not men. As she elaborates on this:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions (de Beauvoir 1956: 159)

Thus, in such a society, “it is naturally to the category of the Other that woman is consigned” (95). In other words, “each sex incarnates the Other in the eyes of the opposite sex, but in man’s eyes woman often appears in spite of everything as an *absolute Other*” (239).

Luce Irigaray is another critic who posits that “the Other indicates the position always occupied by woman within patriarchal culture and other male-dominated cultures which privilege masculinity as self-sameness, or otherwise a signifier of presence, origin or centrality” (qtd. in Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack 2006: 74). Spivak also “shows how the Europeans have attempted to consolidate their sense of selfhood by representing/creating, and employing, their Others. She especially emphasizes the situation of the colonial subjects and women as Others” (Zekavat and Pourgiv 2015: 6). As she mentions and then deconstructs, “my own definition of a woman is very simple; it rests upon the word ‘man’” (Spivak 1987:77; see Zekavat and Pourgiv 2015: 6). Thus, we come up with two propositions: firstly, that gender identity is constructed socially and secondly that otherness constructs gender identity.

#### **4. Otherness and Gendered Identity in *A Streetcar* and *The Stranger***

Next, we will demonstrate the ways in which the identity of female characters in Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* and its Iranian movie adaptation, *The Stranger*, is influenced by the relevant socio-politico-cultural context of the two works. To do so, the binary relation of man/woman in the relationship between Stanley, Stella and Blanche in *A*



*Streetcar Named Desire* will be compared to Amir's relationship with Sepideh and Nasrin in *The Stranger*, from a feminist perspective.

Regardless of cultural differences, the American play first and foremost concerns the life of the people in the family, as does the Iranian film. The role of the family is very important, because it works as a platform where all gender inequalities are reinforced. The family has always been "the crucial site of women's oppression, the space where, unheeded by the world outside, women . . . [are] at the mercy of fathers or husbands; where the law of 'patriarchy' . . . [holds] its most primitive form" (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004:44). The family "both protects us from the outside world and socialises us into it" (44). Besides, "it is generally through our parents and siblings that we come to understand the meanings of gender difference" (44). Thus, family is the most important place where Otherness can be exerted on the individuals, and the familial life of Stella and Stanley, or that of Amir and Sepideh, is not an exception.

As Nancy Tischler argues, the story of *Streetcar* is "one of family tensions" and one that includes "man fighting woman" (Bloom 2005: 124). This is the case with the Iranian adaptation, too, because the majority of its scenes are filmed at home and most of the interactions are between the family members. Stella, "the beleaguered wife of brutish Stanley" (Brinkema 2007: 58), married the one she liked although she knew that they came from different cultural and economic backgrounds. The same thing happens in the Iranian movie. Sepideh, who comes from a rich family, is married to Amir, a simple worker in a stone factory. After a while, however, the factory goes bankrupt and Amir loses his job (00:08:55). Although in both cases, apparently marriage acts as a way to eliminate the differences in social background, in some occasions, this creates tensions between the couples. Besides, both in the play and the movie, the main theme of the story revolves around the appearance of a third party (Blanche/Nasrin who is Stella/Sepideh's sister), whose misdeeds create further conflicts between the family members, specifically between the couple, and between Stanley and Blanche as well as Amir and Nasrin. So, the man/woman conflicts are evident both in the American play and its Iranian film adaptation, although these conflicts partly appear in different ways.

Stella and Stanley live in the south, which "is an epitome of patriarchal society" (Fang 2008: 103). Stanley takes the responsibility to work outside home and make money, whereas Stella stays home and takes care of the household chores. As Susan Koprince contends, "there is no doubt that Stanley Kowalski is hypermasculine" (2009:50). He "believes in male

superiority” and “views women as sexual objects—‘hens’ who have been placed on earth solely for the male bird’s pleasure” (51). Considering the feminist ideas of Simone de Beauvoir (1956: 273), Kate Millett (Coole 2013: 170), Stoller (1984: 9), or de Lauretis (1987: 3), one can easily observe that Stanley finds sex as the core denominator by which the identity of women is constructed. He “especially believes in male dominance within the institution of marriage. He is completely in charge of the Kowalski household, calling all the shots and expecting his wife’s acquiescence” (Koprince 2009: 51). Thus, the binary relation of man/woman in the life of Stanley and Stella works in a way that gives supremacy to man and makes woman the inferior Other.

Tennessee Williams uses a variety of descriptive ways to show the binary opposition of Self and Other in the relationship between Stanley and the female characters. He, for instance, “uses costuming, props, and lighting to convey the emotional strength of his characters and to reinforce the dichotomy between Blanche and Stanley” (Corrigan 1976: 386). The portrayal of the “overwrought, emotionally drained Blanche [who] always wears pastels in half-lights” is in fact in contrast to the image of Stanley, who is described as the “richly feathered male bird” and who “appears in vivid primary colors under strong, garish light” (386). Furthermore, “Blanche’s evocative, diffuse, evasive language and Stanley’s direct, seemingly factual speech,” suggest “a distinction based on gender and class” that “ultimately defeats” Blanche (Vlasopolos 1986: 328). All these imply the spirit of patriarchy in the play, where Stanley has his dominance in contrast to Blanche and Stella, who are treated as the Others.

As the names also suggest, Stanley stands for “stone clearing” and is associated with hardness, which gives a sense of masculinity to him (see Sontag 2009: 5). In the same manner, “Amir,” the Iranian equivalent for Stanley in the Iranian adaptation, bears a name which means “king,” connoting power and dominance. The name “Amir” may also refer to Stanley’s affirmation in the play that “‘Every Man is a King!’ And I am the king around here,” (Williams 1947: 124). These notions of power, strength and dominance which can be inferred from the names of the major male characters are not in the names of women. In the American play, “Stella” is Latin for “star” and “Blanche” denotes “white” in French. Blanche herself states that her first and last names together mean “white wood” (Williams 1947: 60), which implies “decay or even death” (Sontag 2009: 5); in the Iranian adaptation, “Sepideh” means “dawn” and suggests “whiteness.” In addition, “Nasrin” is a small white flower. As far as meanings of names are

concerned, both in the text and the movie, power and dominance are attributed to men, not women.

In the Iranian movie adaptation, Amir's masculinity is represented in similar ways. He is a stout middle-aged man who has a manly figure and frequently smokes cigarettes. He is taller than Sepideh and always has to look down at her face when talking to her. His working in a masonry workplace and dealing with the harshness of the stones and other hard materials also suggest his masculinity in contrast to Sepideh, who has filled the house with flowers that symbolize her tenderness and fragility. Thus, in the movie, the binary opposition of culture and nature acts alongside the dichotomy of man vs. woman that identifies man as powerful, and woman as weak and fragile.

There are, however, differences between the play and the film in this respect. Amir never treats women as sexual objects. This is an important point in the adaptation of the play to the Iranian culture, which is based upon Islamic observations both expected by traditions and imposed by public Islamic laws. Clearly, the principles of the Islamic Iranian laws about the limitations of interactions between men and women and prohibition of openly talking about women's sexuality make the director more conservative about the ways Amir can treat Sepideh and Nasrin. In other words, in the Iranian cinema, a man cannot be as straightforwardly open as Stanley is about women's sexuality and physical charm.

The playwright's freedom of characterization is discernable in his portrayal of his female characters in the *Streetcar*, whereas Tavakoli has a similar limitation for shaping his female characters. Unlike Tennessee Williams's female characters, who talk comfortably about their relationships with men in the past (Williams 1947: 22) and their explicit flirtations with men even in the present (95), in the Iranian cinema, whose laws and principles must be in accordance with the religious and cultural codes of the Islamic Republic of Iran, women should wear *Hijāb* and cannot touch men. Thus, the representation of Blanche who has slept with men in Flamingo hotel (114), who kisses a young boy without knowing him (95) and spends a romantic night out with Mitch (see Scene 6) is out of question in the Iranian cinema. The Iranian director, instead, represents Nasrin as wearing *Hijāb* (though very loosely), obliquely reports her flirtations with the young boy in the art class avoiding any direct reference to the sexual act, intensifies that event's moral impact by making the boy commit suicide, and shows her relationship with Davood from a distance, assuring that she will never touch him before the camera (or behind it, for that matter).

In *The Stranger*, Amir respects women with a sort of dignity and seriousness that are characteristic of the dominant pattern of the Iranian culture. This is in sharp contrast with Stanley's rude behavior, which does not even suit the culture Stella and Blanche come from (Williams 1947: 21). In contrast to Stanley's behavior towards Blanche (see Scene ten in *Streetcar*), Amir addresses Nasrin quite formally. He does not look into the room Nasrin is resting in (00:20:00), and he never abuses her sexually. Besides, he does not dress casually when Nasrin is at home. He always wears a shirt with trousers and avoids wearing fit T-shirts, shorts or other casual clothes. These are all indicative of the cultural and religious differences in the two works. Thus, although the Iranian director attributes masculinity to Amir, he is somehow forced to free women's identity from being sexually harassed by the male characters in front of the camera. He is culturally and legally obligated to give women a rather respectable status and to some extent avoid the patriarchal bias and the Otherness that are exerted on the female characters in the source text.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella acts as a typical 'Angel in the House' as she yields to the cult of domesticity: she respects her husband, pleases her and manages the housework. As Fang observes, at the time when Williams wrote this play, women were dependent on men "both economically and mentally" (Fang 2008: 104). Since Williams is a social writer attempting to portray the socio-economic condition of his time, this might be one of the main reasons for women's passive roles as housewives in his plays as well, even if the intention of the author might be to criticize them. As Fang continues to assert, the patriarchal spirit at the time made women "keep beautiful appearance, behave graciously and flirt with men in order to please them" (104). So, women's gender roles were to serve the male society. Blanche affirms this in *A Streetcar* by stating that there's "a law of nature" that says that "the lady must entertain the gentleman -or no dice!" (Williams 1947: 97), as a result of which "it is inevitable that women would lose their self when faced with traditional customs and strict standards set by men" (Fang 2008: 104). The exception in the play is Blanche, who attempts to work as a teacher to escape her economic dependence on men and tries to disobey the traditional gender roles by following her desire. However, we find her failure at the end of the play. The patriarchal spirit of the context does not allow her to keep her unique identity and to be independent. The male society rapes her as Stanley does, leaves her as Mitch does, betrays her as in the case of Allen and sends her forcefully to a mental hospital where she cannot have a voice of her own, to

declare what Stanley did to her. So, in Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar*, we find women as "the Other" strictly in the service of the male self. The gender identity of women is associated only with the service that they must give to men. As Fang argues, women's "economic dependence on men" prevented them from "the right to dominate their own fate and the strength to struggle against men"; consequently, they are identified as "the Other affiliated to men" (104). Thus, the Otherness of women in the American play might result from the patriarchal atmosphere of the time which is represented by Williams.

There is also a sort of self-imposed Otherness on the side of Stella in her relationship with Stanley. In the first scene, Stanley enters the house, "bellowing" and calling out his wife in a casual way: "Hey, there, Stella, Baby!" (Williams 1947: 10). Stella, however, does not assume the right to treat him in a similar way. Although she does not like to be addressed in such a manner by her husband, she can only remind Stanley "mildly" not to "holler" at her in such a way (10). Stanley, who is careless about this fact, throws the package containing the meat at her (10). Although she feels nervous about it, she cannot continue arguing because 'The Angel in the House' may turn into 'The Madwoman in the Attic' if she revolts. In this situation, Stella submits to Stanley in every way and "undermines her own authority by tolerating [his] dominance" and "identifying herself as the weaker sex" (Jarekvis 2013: 11).

In the second scene of the American play, Stanley enters the house asking "What's all this monkey doings?" (Williams 1947: 32), verbally dehumanizing women. Besides, when Stella asserts that she is going to take Blanche out, Stanley immediately talks in protest, "How about my supper, huh? I'm not going to no Galatoire's for supper!" (32). As he claims, he expects his wife to put the domestic roles prior to everything else. On the one hand, his strong demand for a ready meal suggests that, in the family, he is the boss, the self, whose demands must be fulfilled immediately. On the other hand, Stella acts as a servant and takes this status for granted immediately by answering "I put you a cold plate on ice" (32), which indicates that she has already prepared the supper. So, Stella "matches the sociological profile of the battered woman; for she is essentially a submissive, self-deprecating wife who tolerates and excuses her husband's behavior" (Koprince 2009:4 9). In other words, she herself accepts to be considered as the inferior Other by men and does not act against it. Thus, men can have more power to construct her gender identity.

The case is to some extent different in *The Stranger*. When Amir enters the house, the couple greets each other (00:17:27). He never throws anything at her. Instead, Sepideh goes to the door and helps Amir to take the parcels to the kitchen. In *The Stranger*, like in Williams's *Streetcar*, the traditional gender roles are attributed to Sepideh as she is almost always busy at home washing, cooking or cleaning the house (see 00:05:03, 00:05:38, 00:11:32, 00:17:48, 00:36:00). Like the submissive Stella in Williams's play, she, too, is exposed to a power relationship that determines women's position as wives who must be at the service of their husbands by doing the domestic roles. The play and movie, however, differ in the sense that Amir never demands such domestic roles as aggressively and explicitly as Stanley does. This is the way Tavakoli incorporates the ideal picture of an Iranian man into the film. For example, in several instances, Amir shows that he cares about his wife by asking whether she is fine or not (00:17:30, 00:20:42). Moreover, he asks his friend Davood not to tell Sepideh about his being expelled from the job because he does not want her to get worried (00:16:21). Amir respects Sepideh, values her and cares about her, in contrast to Stanley who physically and verbally harasses his wife frequently.

It must be noted that *The Stranger* was produced in 2014. Consequently, the Iranian adaptation of Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not only a product of a different cultural and religious context, but also that of a different historical time. *The Stranger* is the product of a time in Iran when women have equal rights in certain areas that used to be specifically masculine, such as engineering jobs or driving. They also take part in social events, NGOs', politics and are free to vote or even run for the Parliament. The increasing number of day care centers in the country indicates women's high interest in working outside home and that women no longer limit themselves to their traditional gender roles. As Elaheh Rostami-Povey affirms, "a breakthrough in societal attitudes towards women is visible in Iran and has positive implications for the future of the country" (2016: 3). However, a patriarchal bias still present in the Iranian society is also represented in *The Stranger*. Amir and Sepideh have an argument because the latter hid the truth about Nasrin's gifts for the would-be baby: she had borrowed the money from her sister to buy the gifts. At the end of the argument, Amir beats his wife and leaves the house (00:59:51). Tavakoli attempts to evoke the conflict between Stanley and Stella in the third scene of the play, while simultaneously pointing to the existing patriarchy in Iran.

Furthermore, the economic conditions of people in Iran in the last years have made life very difficult, especially for the middle and lower classes, as a result of which people get more easily impatient and angry. In the movie, Amir loses his job and runs out of money. He needs the money that could be generated from Sepideh's family house in the town, but to his anger and surprise, he is informed that the house has been sold by Nasrin and the money spent on Nasrin's mother. The similarities between the socio-economic conditions of the context of the play and the situation of Iran at the time have made Tavakoli adapt *A Streetcar Named Desire* (and *The Glass Menageries*) for the Iranian cinema.<sup>2</sup> However, the adaptation differs from the source text in that the disputes are milder.

In *The Stranger*, Tavakoli represents the character of Sepideh as a little more complicated than Stella of *Streetcar*. While Sepideh is very concerned about the domestic roles, she, at the same time, has a voice of her own as a female character opposing those of men. For example, when she asks Amir not to smoke at home, he has to obey (00:51:52); when she angrily asks him to leave the scene, he obeys (00:37:30); and when, at night, she asks him to wake up and help her to find Nasrin, who has left home, he does not object or resist (00:27:40), which is in contrast to Stanley, who does not permit Stella to give orders at all (Williams 1947: 38). In Williams's play, we seldom see women as powerful and in control. Stanley only seems to surrender to Stella when she leaves the house after the quarrel and Stanley begs her to go back. He "falls on his knees" in front of her and showing a lot of respect takes her back to the house (Williams 1947: 66). However, as demonstrated, the binary opposition of Self and Other has been to a good extent deconstructed and reversed in the Iranian movie. While the play depicts women's gender identity as predominantly created by patriarchy as men's Other, the film adaptation bestows the women a voice of their own. Although Sepideh plays the role of 'The Angle in the House' in *The Stranger*, she is independent and strong enough to change her husband's mind or to make him carry out her domestic orders.

According to the "Napoleonic code," which he repeatedly recalled in the play, Stanley has the right to take possession of his wife's property (Williams 1947: 35, 46). Every time Stanley emphasizes this code, Stella

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<sup>2</sup> See Nozhat Badi's interview with Bahram Tavakoli about his intentions and motivations to adapt Williams's plays (KhabarOnline 2011). For a history of the status of women in Iran and also for the current situation of women, see the essays collected by Povey and Rostami-Povey (2016).

never objects and, by her silence, accepts it. In *The Stranger*, however, Sepideh confidently tells Amir that the house that he thought to belong to Sepideh and Nasrin, and which is now lost due to Nasrin's debts, was Sepideh's own property. She advises Amir to assume that she has given it to charity and to forget about it (minute 29). This is very different from the way Stella reacts to Stanley, because she has no right to disobey or object him. Moreover, the patriarchal spirit of the play allows Stanley to beat his wife harshly. As soon as he realizes that Stella has lost Belle Reve, he becomes wilder in treating her. Before this point, the audience has never seen him beating Stella or shouting at her, although once Eunice declares that it has happened before (66). Now that Stanley realizes that Stella is financially deprived and can only depend upon him to exist, he changes his behavior: the audience meets a new Stanley, who not only belittles Stella, but he also shouts at her and beats her.

In Tennessee Williams's plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*, physically or mentally ill women are featured, as it is the case of Laura or Blanche. Besides, women's lives depend solely upon men: the financial life of Laura and Amanda, for instance, depends upon Tom's salary in the shoe factory. Stella, too, has no sources of income except for her husband's job. In the same manner, Blanche, who is broken down, resorts to Stanley's house. The case of Sepideh is different, because she is not solely a consumer in the house. Rather, she helps in making money by sewing clothes for dolls and selling them in the neighborhood (00:23:14; 00:34:23). Hence, while she is determined to stay at home and not to work outside, she has found a way to be economically independent of Amir. Thus, Tavakoli portrays a woman, who unlike Stella of the play, tries to overcome the traditional female identity as the Other. In addition, in *The Stranger* we find Sepideh speaking confidently to Amir and Davood. She is strong enough to fight for what she wants. She has left her mother-in-law for the sake of fidelity and virtue. As she asserts, Sepideh's mum left Nasrin's father with two children and fell in love with Sepideh's father. This bothered Sepideh very much, as she hated temporary relationships and wanted permanent love and trust (01:01:12). She asks Amir why he did not inform her of his leaving the house because she was very worried about him (00:57:16). Furthermore, she attempts to find about Nasrin herself and is not content with getting information from Amir (01:06:23). These actions indicate that she has a more powerful and independent character than Stella and does not simply define herself as the Other of men, as Stella practically does.



## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we have explored the similarities and differences in gender identity among the major female characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and its Iranian film adaptation, *The Stranger*. Taking a feminist approach and considering *Otherness* as the basis upon which gender identity is constructed, we have examined the cultural similarities and differences in the ways women are treated. The results of the study suggest that, while in both works the female characters play traditional gender roles, in the film adaptation women are more independent economically and can have a voice of their own to act against the prejudices of men. Whereas in the play women's identity is solely associated with their being the Other, women in *The Stranger* stand relatively for an independent *self*, and are considered as human beings, worthy of care, attention, and respect. However, the spirit of patriarchy pervades the movie adaptation, too, since the female protagonist is beaten by her husband, which suggests both, the influence of the source text, and the attempt to represent the patriarchal structures present in Iran. Moreover, the director has attempted to give a more social outlook to the play in his movie, by demonstrating the socio-political and cultural conditions of the society of Iran. The Iranian director, being more conservative in representing the Otherness attributed to women, due to cultural and sociopolitical reasons, provides the audience with more emancipated female characters, compared to the ones featured in the play.

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